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Slavery Remembered: a Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives

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Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives, by Paul D. Escott. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979. pp. xv, 221. Photographs, tables, bibliography, index. \$12.50.

For more than two centuries black Americans endured a condition unshared by white Americans. Even before black slavery ended, those who escaped the experience sought to understand what slavery was actually like. As early as 1856 Benjamin Drew collected slave sketches in *The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada, related by Themselves*. For sixty years after emancipation, sociologists, folklorists, and other scholars used slave testimony in their work. But historians hesitated to trust what they regarded as ancient memories of a non-representative sample. Furthermore, until the 1920s there was little systematic collection of slave narratives. Then sixty years after the fact scholars at Fisk University began compiling the recollections of surviving former slaves. Their efforts were limited, but a major effort to capture the slave experience occurred in the 1930s when the Federal Writers' Project of the W.P.A. amassed more than 2,500 interviews from ex-slaves in all parts of the nation and from all parts of the South.

Despite the existence of a sizeable body of evidence, historians continued to follow the lead of U. B. Phillips in regarding the old slave memories as unreliable. Not until Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* in 1974 was the collective memory represented by the narratives utilized. Having a preconceived concept of what slavery should have been like, Genovese found evidence which supported his biases. Doubts about the validity of Genovese's interpretation led Paul D. Escott to reexamine both the Fisk and the W.P.A. narratives.

Whereas Genovese found the slave system to be one in which the masters' culture and attitudes were absorbed by the helpless underclass, Escott emphasized the rejection by slaves of as much of their masters' influence as was feasible. To Escott, slavery appeared as a system wherein blacks recognized quickly that no matter how humane and generous the master might appear, the function of the system was exploitation, and the inevitable consequence of such a system was degradation of the exploited. Slaves resisted exploitation, but more important they fought against degradation.

Escott records the methods of resistance to exploitation—rebellion, running away, and sabotage, but he emphasizes the refusal to accept degradation. Much like John Blassingame, Escott stresses the pervasiveness of slave culture despite the pressures of the slaveholding envi-

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ronment. Family, folklore, and religion were vital elements which kept most slaves from accepting the master's definition of his property as inferior and worthless except as a work animal. To Escott, the remarkable aspect of slavery was not the degraded condition of its survivors but the level of humanity which they retained in such an impossible situation.

As Escott notes, Phillips was not totally wrong when he questioned the reliability of the narratives. An individual of advanced years might remember incorrectly. But eight hundred separate persons recalling a similar condition increase the probability that such a condition existed. Unlike B. A. Botkin, whose *Lay My Burden Down* of 1945 was an impressionistic sampling of the narratives, Escott categorized all available narratives and tabulated his findings. He also made allowances for the over-representation of house slaves and children in the sample. His conclusions tend to be cautious, understated, and well-documented.

Slavery Remembered will not end the debate over the nature of slavery. No works have earned that distinction. But this thorough examination of a major body of evidence should stand as one of the sources without which later studies will be incomplete.

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Ethnicity on the Great Plains, edited by Frederick C. Luebke. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1980. pp. xxxiii, 237. Illustrations, index, maps, notes, tables. \$15.95.

Traditional studies of ethnicity in America have described urban communities as being the preservers of immigrant societies. The American cities' monopoly on ethnic studies in the United States exists only because recent scholars have neglected the colorful histories of the many non-Indian ethnic groups who settled in rural America. One ignored region has been the Great Plains. This collection of essays, edited by Frederick C. Luebke, demonstrates that many foreign born peoples moved onto the Great Plains and, like their urban counterparts, altered, retained, or strengthened their ethnic identities.

The authors of the articles that Luebke has assembled originally presented their papers at the second annual symposium sponsored by the

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